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# ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD AND ORAL HEALTH

## ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS AND ORAL HEALTH WHY DENTISTS ARE TALKING ABOUT THEM

A recent large review published in the BMJ linked higher consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) with a wide range of health concerns, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, anxiety, gastrointestinal problems, and increased overall mortality risk.

Ultra-processed foods include many packaged snacks, sugary cereals, fizzy drinks, ready meals, confectionery, and heavily processed convenience foods. These products are often designed to be highly palatable, easy to consume, and have a long shelf life.

While much of the media discussion has focused on general health, there is also an important link with oral health.

### HOW DO ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS AFFECT TEETH?

Many ultra-processed foods contain:

- high levels of added sugars
- refined carbohydrates
- acids
- sticky or highly processed textures

Frequent consumption of these foods can increase the risk of:

- tooth decay
- enamel erosion
- increased plaque accumulation

Even foods marketed as “healthy” can sometimes contain significant amounts of hidden sugars or acids.



### WHY FREQUENCY MATTERS

It is not simply the amount of sugar consumed that affects dental health, but how often teeth are exposed to it.

Frequent snacking, sipping sugary or acidic drinks throughout the day, and grazing on processed foods can repeatedly expose the teeth to acid attacks, increasing the likelihood of decay and enamel wear.

### WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN?

Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to the effects of ultra-processed foods due to:

- developing teeth
- frequent snacking habits
- sports and energy drinks
- heavily marketed convenience foods

Establishing healthy eating habits early can have long-term benefits for both oral and general health.

### SMALL CHANGES CAN HELP

Reducing ultra-processed food intake does not have to mean eliminating all convenience foods. Small practical changes may help, including:

- limiting sugary snacks between meals
- choosing water or milk instead of fizzy drinks
- checking labels for hidden sugars
- increasing fresh and minimally processed foods where possible
- keeping sugary foods to meal times

### THE BIGGER PICTURE

Dentists are increasingly aware of the close relationship between oral health and general health. The mouth is not separate from the rest of the body, and dietary habits affecting overall wellbeing can also have a significant impact on teeth and gums.

This article is intended as general information only and should not replace personalised dietary or medical advice. If you are concerned about your oral health, diet, or risk of tooth decay, please speak to your dentist or healthcare professional.

# Cracked Teeth

## CRACKED TEETH

### WHY THEY CAN BE DIFFICULT TO DIAGNOSE

Cracked teeth are a very common dental problem and are being seen increasingly frequently in modern dentistry. Teeth can develop cracks over time due to normal wear and tear, heavy biting forces, tooth grinding, clenching, large fillings, trauma, or simply repeated stress from chewing.

One of the challenges with cracked teeth is that symptoms can be unpredictable and difficult to identify.

### COMMON SYMPTOMS

Patients may experience:

- pain when biting or releasing pressure
- sensitivity to cold drinks or sweet foods
- discomfort that comes and goes
- pain difficult to localise to one tooth
- occasional sharp pain when chewing

Some patients experience very mild symptoms initially, while others may suddenly develop more significant pain if the crack worsens.

### WHY CRACKS CAN BE HARD TO SEE

Many people assume dental X-rays will clearly show a crack in a tooth. Unfortunately, this is often not the case.

Cracks can be significantly cracked despite appearing normal on an X-ray.

X-rays remain extremely important because they help assess infection around the root, bone levels, decay, existing restorations, other possible causes of pain.

However, diagnosis of a cracked tooth is often based on a combination of:

- symptoms
- clinical examination
- special bite tests
- magnification and lighting
- photographs or scans where appropriate

Sometimes the diagnosis only becomes clearer over time as symptoms evolve.

### WHAT CAUSES CRACKED TEETH?

Several factors may increase the risk:

- clenching and grinding
- stress-related jaw tension
- heavily filled teeth
- chewing hard foods or ice
- age-related wear
- acid erosion weakening enamel

Modern lifestyles and longer retention of heavily restored teeth may both contribute to the increasing prevalence of cracked teeth.



### WHAT TREATMENT MAY BE NEEDED?

Treatment depends on the position, size, and severity of the crack.

Options may include:

- monitoring small cracks with minimal symptoms
- smoothing sharp areas
- replacing old fillings
- protective cuspal coverage restorations
  - additive restorations placed slightly “supraocclusally” (slightly above the existing bite position) to help redistribute forces, protect weakened teeth, and reduce stress on cracked areas.
- crowns or onlays to hold the tooth together
- night guards where grinding is contributing
- root canal treatment if the nerve becomes inflamed or infected
- extraction in severe cases where the crack extends too deeply

Unfortunately, some cracks can progress despite treatment, and occasionally symptoms can remain unpredictable.

# WHAT HAPPENS DURING AN ORAL CANCER SCREENING?

Many patients are unaware that a routine dental examination includes screening for mouth cancer and other abnormalities affecting the soft tissues of the mouth.

At our practice, oral cancer screening is carried out as part of every routine dental examination.

Mouth cancer can affect anyone, although certain factors such as smoking, alcohol, HPV infection, increasing age, and excessive sun exposure to the lips may increase risk.

## WHY IS SCREENING IMPORTANT?

Like many conditions, early detection is extremely important. Mouth cancer identified at an early stage is often easier to treat and may significantly improve outcomes.

Fortunately, most abnormalities identified during screening are harmless, but regular examinations are important because some conditions can develop with very few symptoms initially.

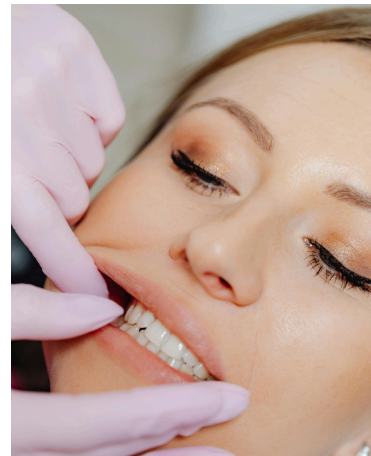
## WHAT DOES THE SCREENING INVOLVE?

Oral cancer screening is usually quick, painless, and takes only a few minutes as part of your examination.

Your dentist may:

- look at the lips, cheeks, tongue, gums, and roof and floor of the mouth
- check for red or white patches
- examine for ulcers or areas that do not heal normally
- feel around the jaw, neck, and lymph nodes for unusual lumps or swelling
- assess any changes in texture, colour, or appearance of the soft tissues

In some cases, photographs or monitoring may be recommended, or referral arranged if an area requires further investigation.



## WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK OUT FOR?

You should arrange an examination if you notice:

- ulcers that do not heal within three weeks
- persistent red or white patches
- unexplained lumps or swellings
- numbness or persistent discomfort
- difficulty swallowing or persistent hoarseness
- changes in the appearance of tissues within the mouth

Most changes are not cancerous, but it is always important to have persistent abnormalities checked professionally.

## REDUCING RISK

Helpful ways to reduce risk include:

- avoiding smoking and tobacco products
- limiting alcohol intake
- maintaining good oral hygiene
- attending regular dental examinations
- using lip protection in strong sunlight

Oral cancer screening is an important part of preventive dental care and is included routinely during dental examinations at our practice.

This article is intended as general information only and should not replace professional advice or diagnosis. If you are concerned about any changes in your mouth, please contact your dentist for assessment.

# Practice News



This year our fabulous Ali B celebrated being at Eynsham Dental Care for 25 years

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